IT WAS NO BIGGIE!

NOW, WE'RE GONNA AVOID YOUR LITTLE DOLL'S MOVES AND KILL YOU, NO PROBLEM!

HM... I HAVE TO SAY THAT YOU ARE QUITE RESOURCEFUL! YOU MANAGED TO ENTER WITHOUT DRAWING ATTENTION!

NARUMI! WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?! HELP ME!

ACT VIII : KARAKURI* MACHINERY

"THE SOFT STONE"①②

I'VE GOT ENOUGH ON MY HANDS!

DOOM

SHUT UP!

ZZAN

ACT VIII : KARAKURI * MACHINERY
"THE SOFT STONE"

GOOH

"CRUSHING FIST"!

GNN!!

THAT HIT WAS PERFECT! NOW...

WHAT ?!

SO THAT'S THE FAMOUS "CHI" ATTACK THAT USES A HUMAN'S VITAL ENERGY?

I HAVE BEEN WANTING SO MUCH TO SEE IT UP CLOSE!

VHH...

VERY WELL... I WILL NOW ALSO ATTACK YOU WITH MY HAND.

SHIT!

ZAH

SHAFF

ARLEQUINO IS ONE OF THE MOST ANCIENT AUTOMATONS.

HE HAS CONTINUALLY IMPROVED HIMSELF OVER THE YEARS BY PERFECTING HIS ARTIFICIAL BODY. HE MOST ASSUREDLY MADE IT IMPERVIOUS TO THIS AND MANY OTHER TYPES OF ATTACK...

YOU COULD HAVE AT LEAST WARNED ME!

NARUMI!

THAT WAS A SIMPLE ...

... SLAP.

LUCILLE IS RIGHT ...

WE "ANCIENT" AUTOMATONS WHO HAVE SERVED MISTRESS FRANCINE SINCE THE BEGINNING HAVE TIRELESSLY IMPROVED OUR BODIES.

REPLACE HUMANS?

IT WOULD BE INTER-ESTING,

BUT YOU DO NOT REALLY KNOW US...

BY SUCKING THEIR BLOOD?! BY SPREADING ZONAPHA SYNDROME?! HOW MANY OF THOSE HUMANS HAVE YOU KILLED?! ALL YOU WANT IS TO REPLACE THEM! AIN'T THAT RIGHT?!

... "RESEMBLE HUMANS"?!

IN ORDER TO MORE CLOSELY RESEMBLE HUMANS...

...TO BECOME HUMAN. OUR ULTIMATE GOAL IS...

...TO MAKE MISTRESS FRANCINE LAUGH!

WE AUTOMATONS DO EVERY-THING...

THAT'S NOT TRUE!

SHANG

MAYBE I DON'T KNOW YOU... BUT WHAT YOU'RE SAYING IS A JOKE!

TAH

BECAUSE YOUR LITTLE FRANCINE IS NOTHING MORE THAN A SIMPLE PUPPET!

IT ALSO GIVES LIFE TO US MACHINES!!!

BUT... IT DOES NOT GIVE A "SUPERIOR LIFE" ONLY TO HUMANS!

AQUA VITAE, THE PINNACLE OF ALCHEMY, IS AN ALMIGHTY ELIXIR THAT IMBUES HUMANS WITH AN ULTIMATE VITAL FORCE.

SHE IS ALREADY... HUMAN!

SHE IS DIFFERENT FROM US!

...IS THE ONLY AUTOMATON CREATED WITH AQUA VITAE.

MISTRESS FRANCINE...

...YOUR OWN MIND.

I HAVE MANAGED TO GIVE YOU...

THANKS TO THE VITAL FLUIDS I DEVISED...

THIS IS GOOD...

Thanks to the fluids she had created, my mind was clear.

Those words were the first I ever heard from Mistress Francine's mouth.

...than when our creator in black had ordered us to destroy the village.

I was able to take in, feel, and understand everything much more clearly...

HE... IS NO LONGER WITH US...

...

WHERE IS... YOUR MASTER?

VHH...

...NO MATTER WHAT HE DID... SO HE LEFT.

HE UNDER-STOOD...

...THAT I WOULD NEVER LAUGH...

I AM LEAVING ON A JOURNEY ...

TO FIND A WAY TO MAKE MYSELF LAUGH.

WHEN I LAUGH, OUR CREATOR ...

...WILL SURELY COME BACK TO OUR SIDE.

THEY ALLOWED ME TO GIVE YOU YOUR OWN WILL.

BECAUSE OF THAT, I WAS ABLE TO CREATE ARTIFICIAL VITAL FLUIDS.

ALTHOUGH THESE FLUIDS CANNOT MATCH THE AQUA VITAE FROM WHICH I WAS CREATED,

I STUDIED ALL THE SCIENCES HE PRACTICED

AND READ THE BOOKS AND NOTES HE LEFT BEHIND.

HELP ME FIND THE WAY TO FINALLY MAKE ME LAUGH!

COME WITH ME!!!

BY THE WAY, YOU STILL HAVE TO SUCK HUMAN BLOOD TO SURVIVE!!!

HAH! ALL THAT BECAUSE SHE GAVE YOU LIFE!

WE WERE, HOW TO SAY IT... ENTHUSED!

GH... GHH...

UNFORTUNATELY, SHE NEVER DID... NO MATTER WHAT WE TRIED.

...TO MAKE MISTRESS FRANCINE LAUGH.

WE WERE MODELED AFTER CHARACTERS FROM THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE...

ZAH...

BA

TA

NOTE: COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE = ANCIENT ITALIAN COMIC IMPROVISATIONAL THEATER

BUT MISTRESS FRANCINE GAVE US OUR OWN WILL

...AND A CLEAR GOAL TO STRIVE FOR.

WE COULD NOT ACHIEVE OUR MISSION.

WE NO LONGER HAD A REASON TO EXIST.

BELIEVE ME, IT'S POINTLESS TO TRY TO BECOME HUMAN!!!

EVEN IF ONE DAY YOU REALLY LOOK HUMAN, YOU'LL STILL BE SIMPLE PUPPETS!!!

HAH!

BONG!!

YOU'RE GONNA DIE, GUY!!!

HERE WE COME!!!

DOH

ARLE-QUINO! I FORBID YOU!

YOU DON'T WANT ME TO KILL THEM? IS THAT IT, LUCILLE?

CAN WE KILL THEM?

HI HI HI! MASTER ARLE-QUINO!

AS YOU WISH... THE TALL ONE IS STARTING TO BORE ME.

WHAT ARE YOU WAITING TO HELP ME FOR?! THEY ARE VERY STRONG!

THAT'LL TEACH YOU TO BOAST ALL THE TIME! FIGURE IT OUT BY YOURSELF!

GRR...

CH...

YOU KNOW WEAPONS ARE USELESS AGAINST ME...

WELL... HOW DO YOU PLAN TO STOP ME?

I TOLD YOU, NARUMI... YOU SWALLOWED THE LAST DROPS OF AQUA VITAE IN OUR POSSESSION.

WHAT?!

...THAT IS REALLY PITIFUL, DON'T YOU THINK? BUT... IT IS TRUE THAT IF WE KILL THEM, ONLY OLD AND SHRIVELED SHIROGANES WILL REMAIN!

A PUPPETEER WITHOUT A PUPPET...

...THERE CANNOT BE...

...ANY NEW SHIRO-GANES.

BUT... IF THERE IS NO MORE AQUA VITAE,

UNTIL NOW, WHEN PEOPLE SUFFERING FROM ZONAPHA SYNDROME DRANK OUR AQUA VITAE, THEY BECAME "SHIROGANES," DESTROYERS OF AUTOMATONS.

SO, WITH ALL THAT KNOWLEDGE, YOU COULD JUST MAKE A NEW SOFT STONE AND MORE AQUA VITAE!

I DON'T GET IT. LUCILLE WAS SAYING THAT ALL THOSE WHO DRANK THE AQUA VITAE ACQUIRED ALL OF THE KNOWLEDGE OF THAT TRAVELING ALCHEMIST! THAT'S WHAT SHE SAID, RIGHT?!

THE KNOWLEDGE CONCERNING THE SOFT STONE REMAINS FUZZY IN OUR MINDS. THERE IS NOT A SINGLE SHIROGANE WHO REMEMBERS ANYTHING ABOUT IT!

HUH?

NO, THAT IS IMPOSSIBLE.

AND THE SOFT STONE AT ITS ORIGIN !!!

AND WHAT GOOD DOES IT DO YOU TO USE THE AQUA VITAE TO BECOME HUMAN?! WHAT DO YOU WANT?!

HA HA HA! HOW AMUSING!

BOTH SHIROGANES AND AUTO-MATONS STILL NEED THE AQUA VITAE...

WE TRAVELED THE WORLD FOR A LONG TIME.

LOOKING FOR WAYS AND CLUES TO MAKING MISTRESS FRANCINE LAUGH.

WE HAVE TRAVELED EXTENSIVELY,

ALONG THE WAY, WE CREATED INNUMERABLE COMPANIONS...

...HOPING THAT ONE OF THEM WOULD ONE DAY MAKE OUR DEAR MISTRESS LAUGH.

BUT ALL WAS FOR NAUGHT.

YES, AND IT IS QUITE RARE FOR US TO AGREE ON SOMETHING.

THAT WAS A LOSING BET FROM THE START, RIGHT, GUY?

THE MIRACLE NEVER HAPPENED.

BUT EVEN WITH THAT,

...WE FINALLY HAD A BREAKTHROUGH!

LATER. WHILE STUDYING SOME BOOKS WRITTEN BY HUMANS ABOUT LAUGHTER...

MISTRESS FRANCINE BECAME HUMAN THANKS TO THE AQUA VITAE. WE NEEDED TO UNDERSTAND HER THOUGHTS! OTHERWISE...

...WE WOULD NEVER BE ABLE TO MAKE HER LAUGH!!!

"IN ORDER TO CREATE LAUGHTER ...

...ONE MUST KNOW THE MIND OF THE OTHER."

...WE WOULD SURELY UNDERSTAND THE HEART OF OUR PRINCESS...

...AND FINALLY MAKE HER LAUGH!!!

THUS... BY BECOMING HUMAN OURSELVES BY USING THE AQUA VITAE...

I SEE...

EXACTLY LIKE YOU DID IN LUCILLE'S VILLAGE...

SCLAC

SUCKING HUMAN BLOOD AND SPREADING THAT DAMN SICKNESS?

SO THAT'S WHY...

...YOU CONTINUE TRAVEL-ING?

YOU'RE USELESS... THE WORLD DOESN'T NEED YOU!

HA HA HA! YOU WERE POWER-LESS BEFORE, AND NOW YOU ACT LIKE A BIG SHOT?! THAT'S HILARIOUS!!!

OOH!

VE-ING!

DO

YOU WERE PRETEND-ING?!

MAYBE...
HAH

BUT ALL GOOD THINGS MUST END.
ARLE-QUINO ...
THANK YOU FOR THE EXPLA-NATION,

AH ...

GRRR